

VZCZCXRO3425
RR RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1232/01 1420938
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 220938Z MAY 06 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2039
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1152
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6716
RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 3557
RUEHVN/AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE 3815

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001232

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM KIRF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VM](#)

SUBJECT: BAPTISTS MEET IN VIETNAM, HIGHLIGHT THEIR SITUATION

Ref: 05 HCMC 994 and previous

1. (SBU) Summary: The Baptist World Alliance - an international umbrella group for some (perhaps 30 million, according to their President), but not all, of the world's Baptists - visited Vietnam May 16-21 to meet with the GVN and hold a large meeting of Baptists in Ho Chi Minh City. The delegation, which included the BWA's President (David Coffey, from the UK) and prominent Baptist officials from Texas, California, Virginia, India, Korea, Vietnam and the UK, was originally concerned that they would not be able to meet anyone from the GVN and would be blocked from including members of the separate Baptist umbrella organizations in Vietnam, only one of which is registered with the GVN. The delegation was able to hold high-level meetings (at the vice-chairman level) with the Commission on Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Fatherland Front in Hanoi and with the CRA in HCMC, and the GVN agreed to include all of the Vietnamese Baptist representatives, including those who are in the process of applying for legal status. Their 500-person meeting and gala dinner in HCMC had to be modified to accommodate GVN concerns, but was held successfully. The unregistered Baptist groups in Vietnam told us that they are able to worship freely, but are waiting for GVN approval of their registration applications. The Baptists reported that Pastor (and former USG person of concern) Than Van Truong is facing official harassment at the local level in Bac Giang Province north of Hanoi. End Summary.

2. (U) The 16-member delegation met with the Charge for 90 minutes at the Embassy on May 16, taking photos and describing the background of the organization (which does not include the large U.S.-based Southern Baptist Conference). Each of the five Vietnamese Baptist denominations present gave its own short presentation; all were variations on the same script: things were difficult in the 1990s, and gradually improved since 2000. Conditions improved markedly in late 2004/early 2005 with the new Ordinance on Religion (and its implementing decree) and the Instruction on Protestantism, to the point where they are now able to carry out activities freely. Four of the five groups have not yet been registered, but the CRA reportedly has promised them they should have their recognition by this summer, perhaps by July. They would like more freedom to open schools and churches and conduct direct charitable works without the involvement of the Fatherland Front, but are generally satisfied with current conditions. The U.S. members of the delegation said they are in regular contact with U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford as well as with their Congressional representatives.

3. (U) In HCMC, the group said that the CRA asked the

delegation to present a list of participants (both Baptist and non-Baptist) for the evening gala dinner event and asked that they consider revising their schedule, omitting the meeting and worship service prior to the commencement of the banquet. This is ultimately what happened: the event was shortened by two hours and recast as an informal dinner.

¶4. (U) HCMC Poloff attended the May 20 function. The event included a lengthy period of religious songs and welcome speeches by members of the visiting international delegation. During each speech, each representative thanked the GVN for allowing the Baptist World Alliance to convene in Ho Chi Minh City. They spoke at length about what it meant to be a Baptist and how they were honored to be in Vietnam. The speeches and dinner proceeded without interruption and included no overt political themes.

¶5. (SBU) Not all Baptists are so positive. On Wednesday, May 17, Embassy Poloff met with Pastor Than Van Truong (who was, until September of last year, confined in a mental hospital for what appeared to be political reasons. Reftel.) He contacted Poloff to express his concern over some incidents his Baptist congregation has faced in Bac Giang Province north of Hanoi. Although Truong has spent most of his time in the south, he is originally from Bac Giang and has tried to move back to Bac Giang to conduct religious activities there. However, he has faced opposition from local authorities in Bac Giang who point out that his legal household registration is in the south and he has no legal right to reside or work in Bac Giang.

¶6. (SBU) Truong's Bac Giang city congregation formed in January 2006, Truong said, and applied for recognition on May 11 of this year. Truong reported that the week of May

HANOI 00001232 002 OF 002

8, the village-level People's Committee Chairman showed up at his house and told him to stop his religious activities, threatened to attack him physically, and called Protestantism "an American religion." Truong said the Chairman brought a security cadre to the meeting and said "God can be in the South, not in the North" and that Bac Giang will never have Protestant groups. Another official apparently went to the houses of some of Truong's congregation to demand they take down crosses they had on display, and to tell them that Truong will soon be arrested and that they should stay away from him, Truong reported.

¶7. (SBU) Truong showed what appeared to be genuine copies of summonses he has received from local security officials in Bac Giang requiring his presence at the police station, and said that the local authorities have challenged his right to reside in Bac Giang.

¶8. (SBU) Poloff told Pastor Truong that we take his case seriously, that we will recommend to the GVN that they favorably consider his church's registration application and that we are concerned about reports of possible abuse.

¶9. (SBU) Truong was quite agitated at the meeting and peppered his discussion with strident criticism of the GVN and demands for political change. At one point, he and his wife became convinced that we were being surveilled by a group of "security agents" sitting nearby in the hotel restaurant where we were meeting; a brief encounter with Poloff later revealed that the "agents" in question were, in fact, Korean businessmen. Truong displayed photos of the meeting in his home where the commune Chairman had supposedly "tried to beat him." The photos showed two men seated in a living room sipping tea.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: For the most part, Baptists in Vietnam have told us that they are able to worship in Vietnam and have benefited from the Ordinance on Religion and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. The problems they have faced have seemed more bureaucratic than anything else.

We are reasonably optimistic that their applications for recognition and registration will be approved eventually, but have been pressing the GVN to do so without much further delay. As always, there are cases to address, Pastor Truong's being the main one at the moment. His organization in Bac Giang should be granted the same consideration as any Protestant organization in Vietnam and should benefit from expeditious recognition and be free of GVN interference. Truong himself, however, presents a more complicated case. His vehement anti-government and anti-Party rhetoric injects a problematic political element into what should be a relatively routine religious administration problem. It is obvious that he has had problems with the authorities in Bac Giang, but whether these problems reflect Bac Giang's reluctance to host a vociferous regime critic who weaves politics and religion together or a genuine antipathy towards Protestantism and an unwillingness to respect the PM's Instruction and the Ordinance on Religion is a question we need to investigate further. End Comment.

BOARDMAN